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ABSTRACT

A team of three organizers and a panel of five experts representing scholars and practitioners from multiple disciplines participated in an innovative session that explored performance at multiple levels in organizations. The session objectives were as follows: (1) raise participants' awareness of multilevel approaches to the study of organizations; (2) create an opportunity for exploring the potential of multilevel frames when dealing with organizational performance issues; (3) provide participants with ideas for using multilevel theory in human resource development applications and emphasize the importance of grounding practice in theory; (4) provide organizers with feedback on the usefulness of the theory; and (5) engage in interactive learning. The session consisted of five parts: introduction and group discussion; group discussion debriefing; linking the discussion to multilevel thinking; eliciting expert opinion; and summarizing learning. The session resulted in two types of output. First, a paper was developed that summarized the main learning points from the session, attendees' reactions, and new insights into the usefulness of multilevel theory as generated by participants. Second, the organizers established a network of interested participants from the session to take forward their shared interest in multilevel approaches to organizational issues. (MN)

Performance on Multiple Levels:
Seeing the Forest *and* the Trees.
Innovative Session 1.

Susan Reynolds Fisher, Darren Short, and Catherine M. Sleezer

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Performance on Multiple Levels: Seeing the Forest and the Trees

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This is an innovative session exploring performance at multiple levels in organizations. In addition to the organizing team, the following scholars and practitioners have graciously agreed to participate by serving on an expert panel and facilitating group discussion—Roger Cude, Jill Hough, Victoria Marsick, Hallie Preskill, Darlene Russ-Eft, and Richard Swanson.

Keywords: Performance, Multilevel, Theory

HRD professionals have effectively used systems theory to build a body of knowledge related to individual, team, and organizational learning and performance. However, our knowledge of the complex relationships that link these processes across organizational levels remains limited. In a paper presented at the 2001 AHRD Conference, "A Multilevel Theory of Performance: Seeing the Forest and the Trees," Susan Fisher reviews the literature on multilevel theory-building and the need for multilevel theories in the study of organizations. Multilevel theory is presented as a means both to explore the "meso" regions of organizational activity that lie between the individual and organizational levels and to integrate views of performance from micro and macro disciplines. It is the focus on the meso region with its myriad forms of complex social interaction that will be explored further in this innovative session. Exploring potential applications for a multilevel performance frame in this interactive format is likely to add further insight into the usefulness of this approach. Participants will be encouraged to grapple with the practical issues inherent in multilevel thinking and gain a hands-on understanding of the purpose of multilevel theory.

The idea that the study of organizations is inherently multilevel is not new (e.g., Behling, 1978; Coleman, 1986; Rousseau, 1985; Simon, 1962). The development of multilevel theory and research, however, has been slow to evolve. In an introduction to a special section in *Academy of Management Review* on multilevel theory, Klein, Tosi, & Canella (1999) suggested that the complexity of multilevel approaches has slowed their development. The theory summarized in Fisher's conference paper is one of the few attempts to capture the true complexity of organizational performance by incorporating the proposals of contemporary multilevel theorists. The resulting theory is so complex that it brings into question the usefulness of such approaches and leaves open the question of whether the benefits of multilevel approaches outweigh their inherent difficulties.

This session offers the opportunity for HRD scholars and practitioners to consider this important and timely question in an atmosphere of collective discovery. Hopefully the ideas generated from this session will also point to specific areas of the theory that might be carved out for testing through empirical research.

Session Objectives

The session will be led by a team of three organizers. In addition, a panel of five experts representing scholars and practitioners from multiple disciplines have agreed to facilitate group discussions among the participants and serve as panel members. Equal emphasis will be placed on theory, research, and application to ensure that the interests of all participants will be addressed. The session is designed around five objectives:

- To raise participants' awareness of multilevel approaches to the study of organizations.
- To create an opportunity for exploring the potential of multilevel frames when dealing with organizational performance issues.

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- To provide participants with ideas for using multilevel theory in HRD applications and emphasize the importance of grounding practice in theory.
- To provide the organizers with feedback on the usefulness of the theory.
- To engage in interactive learning.

Session Content and Structure

The session is designed in five parts: (A) introduction and group discussion; (B) group discussion debriefing; (C) linking discussion to multilevel thinking; (D) eliciting expert opinion; and (E) summarizing learning. The objectives and design of each of these sections follows.

Part A

Facilitator: Darren Short

Objectives:

- To describe the session structure and introduce the organizers and guest panel members.
- To introduce a case study developed for the session which outlines a complex organizational performance issue such as might be encountered in a real organization.
- To divide the participants into discussion groups and assign facilitators (guest panel members).
- To allow the groups to discuss how they would approach the performance issues as represented in the case from specific perspectives including process, learning, individual, team, and organization.

Length: 30 minutes.

Mechanism: Brief presentation by main session facilitator followed by group discussion.

Content: Case study outlining a real-world organizational performance problem

Part B

Facilitator: Darren Short

Objectives:

- To share the insights on the specific case performance issues emerging from discussion groups.
- To develop evidence of the multilevel components of organizational performance as they emerge from the case.
- To elicit examples of how participants focus on different levels when considering organizational performance.

Length: 20 minutes

Mechanism: Informal presentation by discussion group representatives. Facilitator to summarize content on flip chart.

Content: Ideas and examples developed in participant groups.

Part C

Facilitator: Susan Fisher

Objectives:

- To highlight the multilevel nature of organizational performance as exemplified in group views of case issues.
- To introduce a multilevel theory of performance and demonstrate how it might be applied to issues emerging from the case.
- To allow participants to experience how links from theory to practice may be useful in dealing with performance issues.
- To generate examples of how the multilevel theory of performance might be applied and tested.

Length: 20 minutes

Mechanism: Presentation by facilitator using examples elicited from group discussion to outline a multilevel theory of performance.

Content: The summarized ideas generated by the participant groups and illustrations from Fisher's paper.

Part D

Facilitator: Catherine Sleezer

Objectives:

- To elicit expert feedback on multilevel approaches to organizational performance in general.
- To gain further insight into usefulness of multilevel theory.

Length: 15 minutes

Mechanism: Panel discussion—informal sharing of ideas by panel of guest experts.

Content: Guest panelists will have received supporting material prior to the session. Participants will receive handouts summarizing Fisher's framework.

Part E

Facilitator: Darren Short

Objectives:

- To summarize learnings as they have emerged from the session.
- To elicit suggestions as to where these new insights might lead.

Length: 5 minutes

Mechanism: Facilitated discussion

Content: Material elicited during the session.

Outputs

To support the learning expected to take place in this session, the organizers have planned for two types of output. First, the paper on which this session is based will be revised to include a section summarizing the main learning points from the session, the reactions of attendees, and new insights into the usefulness of multilevel theory as generated by participants. The revision will be submitted to *Human Resource Development International*. Second, the organizers will establish a network of interested participants from the session to take forward their shared interest in multilevel approaches to organizational issues. The network born of this session will share e-mail addresses so that a listserv may be generated for members to report on progress in multilevel performance research and share new articles and books on multilevel approaches. In addition, there may eventually be sufficient interest to propose an *Advances* issue on multilevel applications in HRD. If this possibility materializes, the session organizers will assist in identifying possible chapter authors and the areas of interest within the AHRD community.

Contribution

The session organizers have been wrestling with the issues related to multilevel views of organizational performance for the past year and look forward to the opportunity to share them in an interactive session that emphasizes learning through discovery. We also hope that the experience will make a contribution to HRD in the following four ways: (1) by raising participants' awareness of multilevel approaches to the study of performance; (2) by demonstrating a need to expand our frame of reference and integrate knowledge from allied disciplines such as social psychology and organization theory; (3) by creating a forum for exploring the theory-to-practice link that HRD scholars have been calling for (e.g., Swanson, 1999; Holton, 1999); and (4) by developing a new network for sharing knowledge and research related to the application and testing of multilevel performance theories.

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